

## Chapter I

### Introduction

I remember staring at my feet in complete frustration, shoes on and untied and try as I might - I could not tie them. Over and over again, my parents, my grandmother, and my older siblings tried to teach me. My sister and one brother teased me, called me a retard; I felt they were right after all what seven-year-old doesn't know how to tie a shoe?

One day my grandmother's front door opened and my shining knight strode in at six foot four inches wearing his Navy whites and Navy hat. Before he had a chance to settle in, rest, hang out with family or friends, his mother, my grandmother begged him to teach me to tie my shoe. I will never forget how he sat down on a chair and made me sit by his feet and watch him tie his shoes. Then he told me to tie mine. I did without any problems.

I am left-handed, my uncle Mike, my shining knight, is also left-handed. It took modeling how he tied his shoes, not how the rest of my family tied their shoes for me to learn. I equate learning to write with learning to tie your shoes. Teaching how to write by outdated grammar instruction of identification of parts of speech, with the linear writing process, and assignment driven curriculum is the same as being taught to tie a shoe by a person with a different dominant hand as your own. It does not always work.

Last year I witnessed modeling of writing work with three of my students, who after reading Ruta Sepseys' book, *Salt to the Sea*, decided they wanted to emulate her writing. They took their next writing assignment to new heights as they poured over their sentences and studied her sentence structure. Since my students write their papers in my class, I knew the writing belonged to them. They credited reading Sepseys' book with their new, advanced writing skills. Though I taught modeling in class before, this was the first time I witnessed students deciding to model on their own. I noted more than their writing improving, these girls, who were all in my eighth-grade reading intervention course for struggling readers, decided to start a book club where they discussed how the author used language to convey meaning. In the end, these girls made increased reading improvements in their Lexile.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

In some American schools, the objective-driven curriculum designed to give a shallow understanding - just enough - to pass an end of the year standardized test does not teach the craft of writing. Instead, students write a variety of papers but have little time to do so and are not given proper instruction on how to put sentences together to form paragraphs that form a longer piece of writing.

I am not the only observer to realize this model does not work. Don Killgallon in his sentence composing booklet wrote, "Research has shown that teaching grammar does not improve students' writing, but that's because studying grammar has been an exercise in naming, defining, and identifying various grammatical structures, with little or no attempt to have students practice those structures in ways professional writers actually use them." (1998, p. 22) Killgallon spent years researching before coming up with his sentence composing model, the one I want to study for my project inquiry. One of his sources, Frances Christensen, in his book, *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* explained, "In composition courses, we do not really teach our captive charges to write better - we merely expect them to." (Christensen & Christensen, 1967, p. 129) During the school year, teachers tend to have little time to teach a type of writing before the students take a high stakes test on the writing which is usually about some fiction or nonfiction essay they have to read as part of the exam. There is no time to develop fluency or sentence writing skills.

Collins, Lee, Fox, and Madigan from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 2017 completed a writing intensive reading comprehension study. They observed how using interactive writing assignments with critical thinking questions about the reading as opposed to fact-finding questions would raise reading comprehension. "When faced with the task of getting students ready for high-stakes assessments, teachers often teach writing about reading in reductive, formulaic ways." (2017, p. 312) These formulaic ways usually consist of the five-paragraph model with five sentences per paragraph. The thesis is the first sentence, and each

paragraph has a topic sentence and if quotes are required there needs to be one to two in each body paragraph. These formulaic papers sound the same for the teacher and don't teach the student to do more in-depth research or critical thinking. Unfortunately, there are too few and varied essays and research models for students to study before writing their paper. The students, in turn, tend to teach themselves.

In the current trend of student-centered learning, the idea of students self-teaching may be a plus, however, "Despite the frequent use of self-teaching, it fails to capitalize on the potential benefits of the social environment on learning. Also, not using models may limit the level of skill acquisition." (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 14). In Schunk and Zimmerman's 2007 study on self-efficiency and self-regulation, they scrutinized various past studies and completed their studies in which it was determined teacher-directed lessons via modeling help to teach student efficacy and self-regulation strategies. In one such study from 2002, they summarized a study based on college writing revision skills. "Students were assigned to one of six conditions. Mastery modeling students observed a model demonstrate the revision strategy flawlessly; coping-model students observed a model who initially made and corrected errors; no-model students were not exposed to a model. Results showed that observing a coping model led to greater increases in writing self-efficacy." (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 20) The final results also showed students who did not have any model made no gains in their writing abilities or self-regulation. Several of the research Schunk and Zimmerman studied proved modeling writing and revision techniques help students remember the strategies in their long term memory and understanding portions of their brain which enabled the students to transfer the strategies to another instructional context.

There is this famous story in which someone asked Annie Dillard if he could be a writer and her answer was, I don't know. Do you like sentences? (Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 1990) Dillard's story reinforces the idea that sentences are the building blocks to writing. In the past couple of years, authors like Jeff Anderson and Don and Jenny Killgallon have reinforced this idea in schools. Anderson has been a driving force in sentence modeling through a variety of bellringer and mini-lesson activities. The idea of teaching writing as a craft is gaining steam, but is it enough steam? Do we need to do more in our schools, especially when writing and reading

comprehension still lags behind other nations? Do we need to model writing and revision processes more in-depth through sentence combining strategies?

In a 2002 NAEP study, The United States only had 2% of grade eight students advanced in writing, but 16% were below basic while 54% of students only ranked as basic. (Gallagher, 2006, p. 5) In the same year, the NAEP's report card for grade 8 students listed 3% of the students at an advanced reading level, but a total of 31% of students fell below basic in reading comprehension. In 2011 the results for writing had declined slightly, in 2002 a total of 30% of students were at or above the proficient mark with only 16% below basic compared to the 2011 results with a drop of 3% of students at or above the proficient mark for a total of 27%. There was an increase of 4% of students below basic in writing totaling 20%. Even though there was a slight increase in the reading scores with a 1% increase in at or above proficient and a 1% decrease in below basic, these increases are not significantly high enough to counter that reading and writing are separate entities in comprehension abilities. ("NAEP Nations Report Card - National Assessment of Educational Progress - NAEP", 2018)

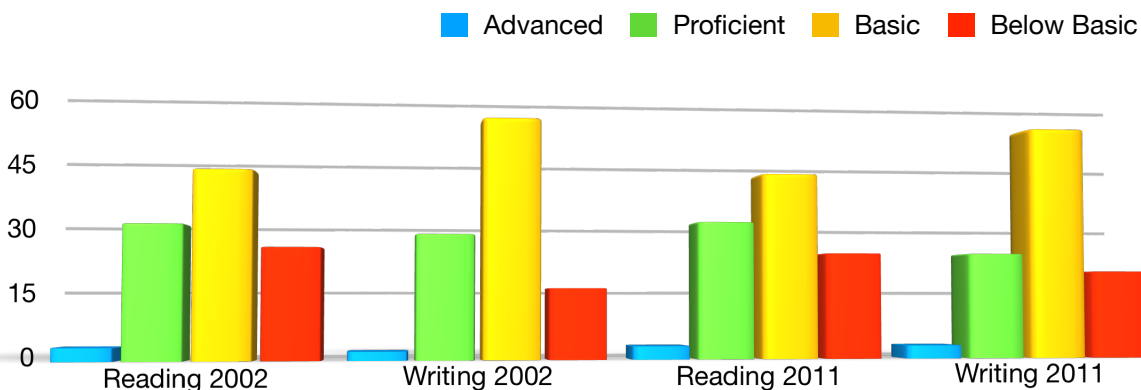


Figure 1: NAEP Reading and Writing changes between 2002 and 2011.

The good news in reading is the slight improvement in the number of advanced readers, but in 2017 the number of below basic readers increased.

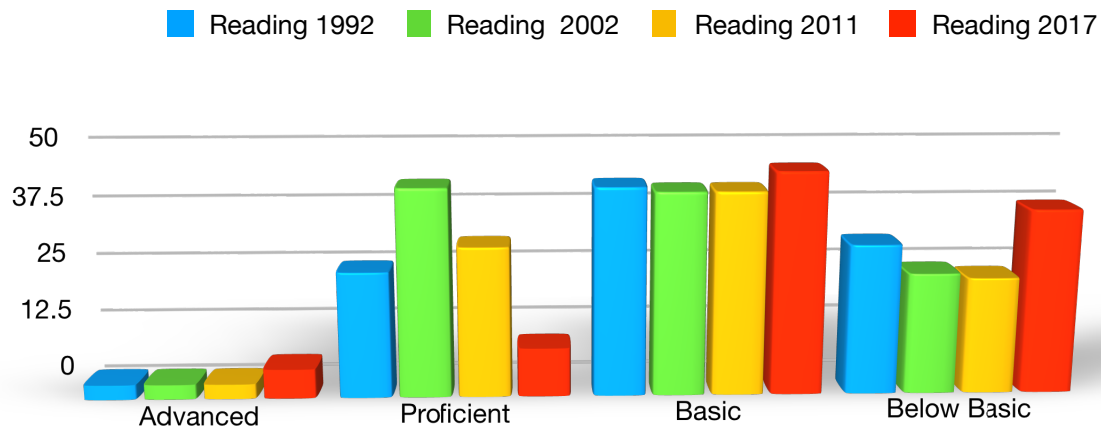


Figure 2: NAEP national reading results from 1992 to 2017

Another way to visually represent the decline in reading skills even though the overall advanced level reading comprehension has gone up is to study the 1992 at or above proficiency compared to the 2017 at or below basic reading comprehension.

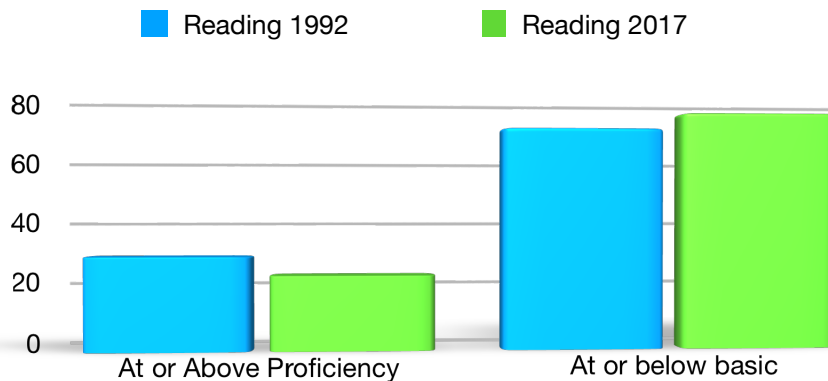


Figure 3: NAEP Reading comprehension changes from 1992 to 2017.

Not only is writing more of a quick assignment driven process, the ideas in some schools that oral read-alouds are losing favor and therefore frowned upon take away the chance for the teacher to model sentence level teaching and comprehension strategies for the students.

I theorize and hope to prove through a project-based inquiry that teaching the craft of writing through the use of sentence and paragraph composing activities while modeling the reading strategies in the sentences will not only increase writing competency but also increase reading comprehension.

Before neuroscientists discovered mirror neurons, Rene Girard, a twentieth century French born philosopher, Catholic, and historian, created his Mimetic Theory. The theory, complex in nature, began after Girard noticed authors he read seemed to mimic each others' writing styles. He claims "Dostoyevsky also belongs to the group of novelistic authors whose work is permeated with imitation." (Palaver & Borrud, 2013, p. 56) This statement refers to earlier remarks and notations Girard made after he pulled sentences and ideas from famous classical literature, Shakespeare, and Russian literature thus proving authors are constantly mimicking those who came before them. "Girard is not the only thinker for whom mimicking plays a significant role....Aristotle in Poetics [remarks] 'Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world and learns first by imitation.'" (Palaver & Borrud, 2013, p. 41) Any parent or teacher who works with children understands how mimicking behavior and language is an integral part of their learning process and childhood development.

Francis Christensen in his research studied Mimetic Theory and used its ideas to develop an approach to teaching writing through sentence composing through modeling famous sentences. "What I am proposing carries over itself into the study of literature. It makes the student a better reader of literature." (Christensen & Christensen, 1967, p. 137) What Christensen proposed was more than modeling sentences, it was a leveled approach of sentence chunking, unscrambling, imitating, combining, and expanding known as sentence composing. He was not able to finish his complete theory before he passed away, but Don Killgallon researched Christensen's work and created a series of textbooks ranging for elementary to college level aged students. In Killgallon's theory booklet he states, "The marked success of sentence composing results from its use of a mimetic theory of language development." (Killgallon, 1998, p. 6)

Sentence chunking, the first aspect of the sentence composing theory, requires students to survey sentences and determine basic units of meaning. An example is as follows: John walks to

the store with his sister to buy groceries for his family. The students need to determine where the sentence can be chunked and place slash marks. The preceding example would look like this after a student chunked it: John walks / to the store / with his sister / to buy groceries / for his sister. Before students chunk sentences by themselves, they study model sentences which are chunked in different ways and determine which one sounds best. "The best words not only pinpoint an idea better than any alternative but echo it in their sound and articulation, a phenomenon called phonaesthetics, the feeling of sound." (Pinker, 2014, p. 22) Chunking helps students first develop an ear without being bogged down by academic vocabulary. The academic vocabulary comes later after students notice similar reoccurring patterns in writing.

The ear development and phonaesthetics help students in other areas of reading and writing. In their longitudinal study by Ludo Verhoeven and Jan Van Leeuwe about the development of comprehension they state: "The parsing of sentences into constituent components; the drawing of inferences to make the relations within and between sentences sufficiently explicit and thereby facilitate the integration of information; and the underlying text structure, the propositions within a text (micro structure) and the global gist of a text (macro structure)." (Verhoeven & Leeuwe, 2008, p. 409) Chunking helps students make those relations and in a way is a modern twist to sentence diagramming. However where sentence diagramming relies on students understanding where and how to place lines and what parts of the sentence goes where chunking focuses on the line of the sentence and makes a smoother flow of ideas for students. The inferences they make about meaning are gradually released in the other levels of Christensen's theory.

One of the other levels is the unscrambling of sentences. "Sentence unscrambling provides a close look at how professional writers structure their sentences....unscrambling provides practice in moving sentence parts for a variety of style." (Killgallon, 1998, p. 7) This concept is important as it allows students to understand parts of sentences are not set in stone in their order and changing order can either keep the meaning the exact same or slightly emphasize or deemphasize parts or completely change the meaning. This understanding helps students in their inferencing in comprehension and gives them a chance to question why the author chose to write a sentence a particular way. Fenn and McGlynn reinforce this idea in an activity text they

wrote about teaching grammar through writing. "Grammatical analysis of the construction of sentences can already reveal a great deal before attention is turned to their actual word-level content. Students can use their knowledge of different types of sentences to draw interesting conclusions about characters' personalities and motivations that can greatly enrich their understanding of a character's role within the text." (McGlynn & Fenn, 2018, p. 6) Once students have a sentence level approach of understanding meaning nuances, then the student practices (mimics) writing.

The next face of Christensen and Killgallon's sentence combining approach is imitating model sentences. This imitation writing is not only a time where students model the parts of speech, phrases, and clause structure of a sentence, but it is a time where the teacher and students discuss the whys of the writers' decisions. "A sentence-level analysis can still offer much to students who will need to be able to discuss the structure of the text as well as the words [used]." (McGlynn & Fenn, 2018, pp. 11-12) Rachel Fenn and Anna McGlynn's book *Teaching Grammar through Literature* offers professional fictional text pieces and questions to help the students discuss the meaning of the sentence or passage based on its semantical structure.

I hypothesize teaching through the sentence combining approach will help the students discuss and comprehend literature based on the semantical structure of a sentence and passage. Of course, "The purpose of sentence imitating is to increase a student's ability to vary sentence structure through a deliberate citation of the structure of the model sentence." (Killgallon, 1998, p. 10) With this increased ability students' writing fluency and competencies should increase. In a 2017 study by Young-Suk Grace Kim and Christopher Schatschneider at the Florida Center for Reading Research, the two researchers delved deeper into the idea of working memory in writing and how higher-order cognitive skills related to writing tasks. In their conclusion, they determined, "As children develop their writing skills, the nature of relations and relative importance of various component skills might vary. For instance, the relations of higher-order cognitive skills to oral language and writing might be stronger for older children as their cognitive skills are further developed and writing task becomes more demanding." (Kim & Schatschneider, 2017, pp. 13-14). Most literature and studies researched the beginning writing skills of elementary school-aged children and not middle school or high school aged students.



The literature also danced around the idea of writing competencies and reading comprehension but didn't necessarily give a direct correlated link. With the advent of various reading comprehension measures and software which can breakdown an author's writing to a grade level it is time to take a closer link at improved writing and its correlation on comprehension.

### Chapter III

#### Methodology

In order to check my hypothesis I want to make sure I have norm-referenced results on my students' reading comprehension and written expressions. In order to do this I will pre test my students using the using the Test of Written Language, fourth edition created by Donald D. Hammill and Stephen C. Larsen using form A then post test my students using form B. The test breaks down into seven subtests which include: vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, and sentence combining which make up a contrived writing score and then include contextual conventions and story composition subtests which make up the spontaneous writing score. Each subtest has specific guidelines in the examiner manual for scoring that takes all subjectivity out of the equation. Raw scores are turned into percentiles and scaled scores. The scaled scores determine the straight of the writer for his or her grade or age.

For checking comprehension, I will use the twelfth grade fiction and nonfiction reading passages from William G. Brozo and Peter P. Afflerbach's *Adolescent Literacy Inventory Grades 6-12* published by Pearson. The inventory published two similar passages in each grade level, and since my students are twelfth grade honor students, I chose *Jane Eyre* passages from Charlotte Bronte for the fictional piece and passages from the grade twelve history textbook, *Principles of Government*. Each passage contains embedded questions and comprehension end questions.

I completed my project inquiry with a group of twelfth grade honor students at Landstown High School in the Virginia Beach Public School system. The class is a group of twenty-six students aged eighteen and from a diverse mix of races. The students are also part of the district's Science and Engineering Academy and as a result had to apply to get into the program and most of them tend to be of a higher socioeconomic class.

I began my pre-test on March 18, 2019, and I completed my post-test on April 10, 2019. Pretest findings resulted in only thirteen students testing at or above the superior rating in contrived writing and only five students testing at or above the superior rating in spontaneous

writing. Since I was working with honor students who were part of a STEM academy, I thought more students would have better writing scores. What shocked me even more was the low comprehension scores. Eleven out of twenty-three students tested at a frustration level in nonfiction, but even more tested at a frustration level in fiction: twenty-one out of twenty-three students.

While reviewing this data, I found an interesting link (not statistically significant due to the small sample size) between contrived writing scores and nonfiction comprehension and spontaneous writing scores and fiction comprehension. Overall students who did better on contrived writing did better on the nonfiction comprehension. Those students who did well on the spontaneous writing fared better on the fiction comprehension inventory. Even if the students had a high contrived writing score, if the student had a low spontaneous writing score that student had a frustration level in fiction comprehension.

In my unit plan, which is attached in the appendix, I focused on teaching three main sentence structures and three main good marks to the students while also preparing them to write a multiple perspective research paper. These structures include the appositive, the absolute, the participle phrase, colons, the dash, and the semicolon. I used Don and Jenny Killgallon's textbook, *Paragraphs for High School*. Since I was also required to have my students complete a research paper, I used model essays from Alfred Rose and Paul Eschholz eleventh edition, *Models for Writers: Short Essays for Composition* published by Bedford/St.Martin in 2009.

During the process of teaching the unit, I only saw the students for 75-minutes every other day as the school works on an A/B block schedule. I found this difficult to keep momentum with this schedule. Yet, I believe the students were concerned about learning the sentence structures and how to use them in writing research as one of my students mentioned that Killgallon's book only uses fiction examples and he believed, as a result of this, that the structures were not used in research. Due to his comment, I scoured my personal nonfiction research books for the structures and created a document for my students. We took time in class to go over them and for them to mimic their research writing to look like the examples.

## Chapter IV

## Findings

Out of a total of twenty-six students, not all were present to pre-test each section. Even fewer were available to post test due to days off for Advanced Placement testing in Chemistry and Statistics - testing which takes place off campus. I also threw out one test once the student decided to start writing in his form of Japanese. The following chart shows all the data from the pre and post tests for all twenty-six students.

Writing Fluency Comprehension Data Set

	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
3/16 CW	65	71	64	66	52	62	53	63	38	69	67	70	69	58			52	59		69
5/10 CW	69	77	80	72	58	78	67	73	67	73	74	79	73	67		66	72	72	59	70
3/16 SW	22	27	26	23	18	26	23	25	24	18	25	19	24	17			13	29		18
5/10 SW	33	29	28	23	31	29	24	23	23	26	24	26	32	30		29	21	17	12	31
3/16 OW	87	98	90	89	70	88	76	88	62	87	92	89	93	75			65	88		87
5/10 OW	102	106	108	95	89	107	91	96	90	99	98	105	105	97		95	93	89	71	101
3/16 FICTION	73.2	96.4	69.6	71	78.5	78.5	71		42.8		62.5	50	92.8	64	60.7	57	78.5	75	28.5	50
5/10 FICTION		78.5	74	75	40	85	70	70		40	70					65		82.5		65
3/16 NONFICTION	84.3	84.3	75	84.3	89	87.5	56.25		56.25		78.12	43.75	92.8	87.5	28	84.3	92.8	80.3	0	90.6
5/10 NONFICTION		86	83	97.6	64	88	45	76		81	76					89		95		90.5
3/16 OCOMP	79	88.3	72	76.7	84	83.3	63.3		50		71	46.7	92.8	76.7	60.7	71.7	86	77	13.3	71.7
5/10 OCOMP		84	80	86.5	52.4	86.5	57	73		61	73					77		89		78

Figure 4: All data from pre and post tests: contrived writing, spontaneous writing, overall (combined) writing, fiction and non fiction comprehension and overall comprehension from test dates 3/16/19 and 5/10/19.

The numbers on top represent each student, their names were not on their tests, only numbers to represent them. I broke down the next charts based on just the fourteen students who took all the tests. My hope was that all students improve in writing fluency and improved in their comprehension, but this did not happen. Though almost all students improved their scale scores in writing, some had significant percentage drops in reading comprehension for either the fiction or nonfiction readings. Yet, when combining the combined writing and the combined comprehension for the fourteen who finished all parts, a majority of the students showed improvement in both areas.

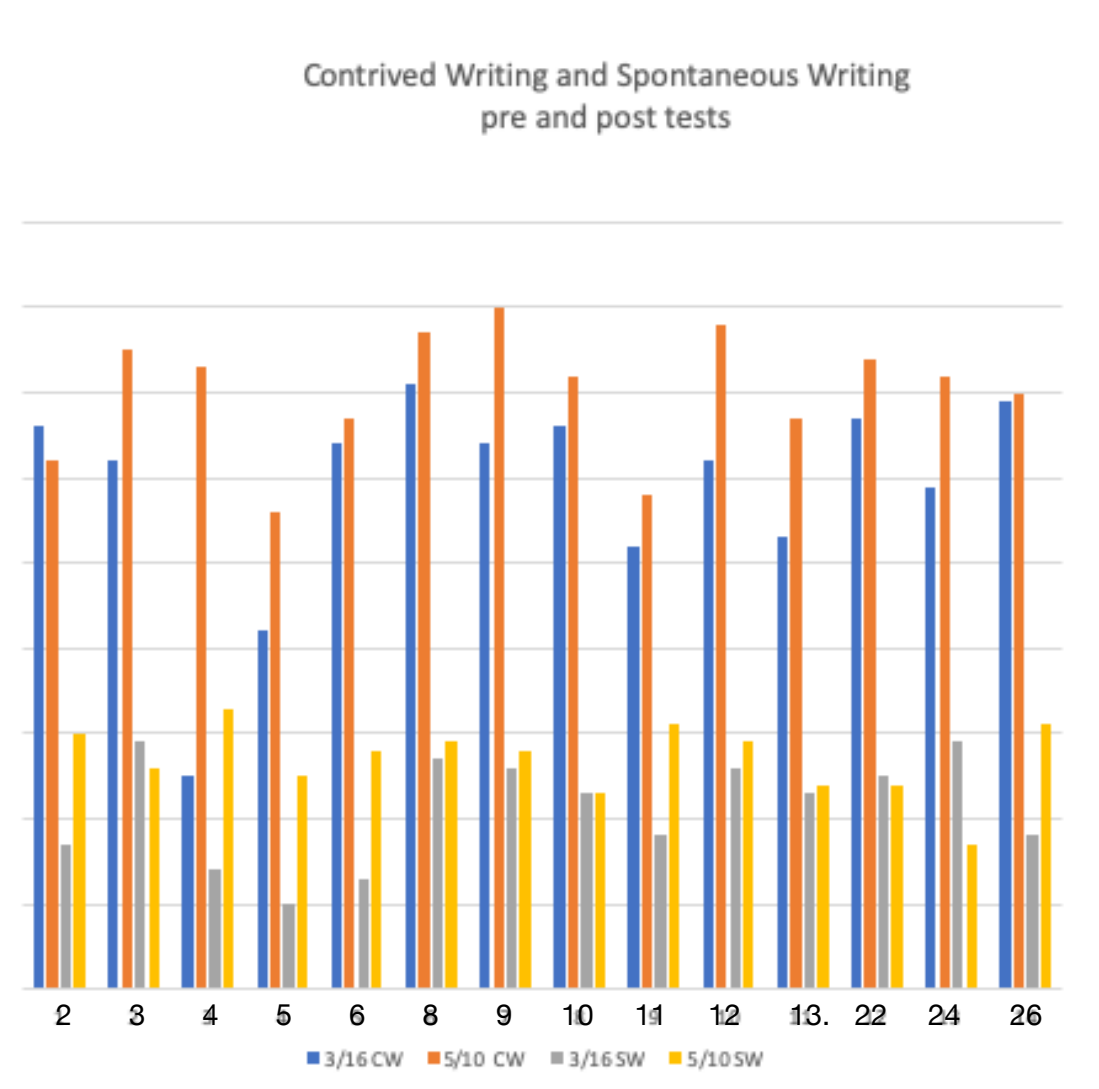


Figure 5: All data from pre and post tests for the 14 students in contrived writing and spontaneous writing, from test dates 3/16/19 and 5/10/19.

Thirteen of the students improved in their contrived writing scores while only ten proved in spontaneous writing scores. It is also interesting to note that there was a more notable improvement in contrived writing than in spontaneous writing.

In the next chart only nine of the fourteen students improved in fiction comprehension while eleven out of fourteen improved in nonfiction comprehension.

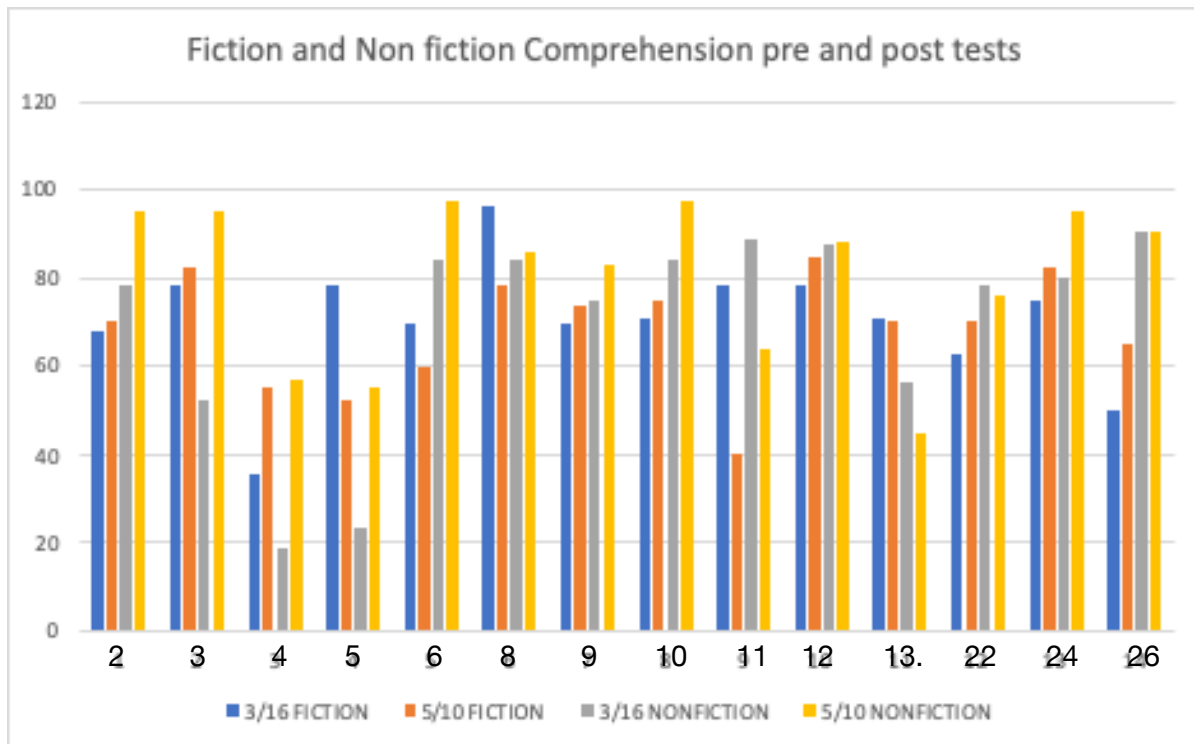


Figure 6: All data from pre and post tests for the 14 students in fiction and nonfiction comprehension, from test dates 3/16/19 and 5/10/19. All numbers are in percentage correct.

The next graph is a visual representation of the fourteen students' combined writing and combined comprehension comparative data. Again this shows eleven students improved in both writing and comprehension. Even though the sample size ended up being smaller than I anticipated, I think the same percentage of results (78.5% improvement) would be represented on a larger scale.

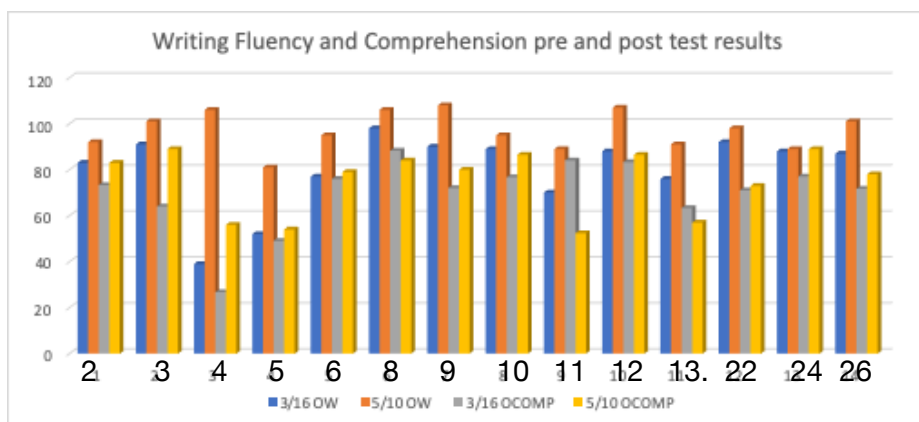


Figure 7: All data from pre and post tests for the 14 students in combined writing and comprehension, from test dates 3/16/19 and 5/10/19.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

The general purpose of my study was to determine if using the Sentence Composing approach to teach writing as a craft instead of an assignment driven task would improve writing fluency and then in return improve reading comprehension. Out of the twenty-three students who were able to pre and post test for the writing sections 22 out of 23 improved in contrived writing which again was in vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, and combining sentences. In the spontaneous writing task which includes rubric checklists for contextual conventions and story composition 18 out of 23 students improved. These numbers, though from a small sample size, show that teaching sentence composing can help students transfer the skills to other writings.

### Plan of Action

If given the opportunity to complete this study again I feel I would need to make several changes. First, I would want a larger and more random population of students from struggling to honors to determine if there is in fact any statistical significance in the findings. I would also want more time (an entire school year) with the students and more explicit instruction and modeling. I was a guest in another teacher's classroom and I had to fight group work protocols that interfered with the students focusing on their own work and writings. Finally, I would want a control group of a random population from struggling to honors to assure that the sentence composing technique is what may make a difference.

### Questions/Discussions

After the unexpected correlation result of the contrived writing and nonfiction comprehension and the spontaneous writing and fiction comprehension, I wonder if the over emphasis on only teaching nonfiction pieces to correspond to the new Common Core goals are harming students in their creative writing abilities and therefore fiction comprehension abilities? I also wonder if focusing on creative writing techniques can help with nonfiction writing.

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